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A scribal edition of *Piers Plowman* C in Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, 293

ABSTRACT

This essay examines the unique form of the final, «C» version of *Piers Plowman* contained in the fifteenth-century manuscript Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, 293. The manuscript is one of several listed by the editors of the standard critical edition of *Piers Plowman* as characterized by serious textual deficiencies, though no other copy contains the same textual gaps found here. The material form and decoration of the manuscript make this a particularly modest presentation of the poem, even by the standards of the generally minimally-decorated manuscripts of Langland's work. It lacks the higher grades of decoration and the extensive annotation found in some better-known copies of *Piers*. Despite its humble physical form, however, the manuscript is of significant potential interest for its four major omissions of text. Two of these textual lacunae may be ascribed to commonplace accidents that probably occurred during the production of the present copy. Two are more likely to have occurred in an earlier exemplar, and I argue that they may reflect a deliberate scribal redaction of the poem, a form of the text that eliminates certain aspects of Langland's work in order to bring others into greater prominence. The (deliberate) gaps in the Corpus text make it an important witness to the various, sometimes eccentric, forms that the poem took in the years following its original composition.

Some thirty years have elapsed since the pioneering essays of Barry Windeatt and George Russell placed the manuscripts of Chaucer and Langland at the forefront of literary, as opposed to solely textual, study of the two poets' works¹. The proposition that the labours of Middle English scribes might be studied as a form of «literary criticism», or at least as offering important insight into the early reception of medieval literature, now scarcely needs justification. Yet despite the recent excitement about Middle English literary manuscripts generated by projects such as Mooney et al's scribal identifications and the ongoing publications of the *Piers Plowman* Electronic Archive (hereafter PPEA), still a relatively small number of the fifty-two complete

¹ Barry WINDEATT, «The Scribes as Chaucer's Early Critics», *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, 1, 1979, p. 119-141; G. H. RUSSELL, «Some Early Responses to the C-Version of *Piers Plowman*», *Viator*, 15, 1984, p. 275-303; George RUSSELL, «“As They Read It”: Some Notes on Early Responses to the C-Version of *Piers Plowman*», *Leeds Studies in English*, n.s. 20, 1989, p. 173-189.

manuscripts of *Piers Plowman* is well known, even to specialists in Langland's work. In keeping with a long-standing critical bias, the B-text copies, particularly those of metropolitan production (one or two now touched with the glamour of celebrity by their possible association with «Chaucer's scribe» Adam Pinkhurst), have commanded the greater share of scholars' attention. The relative neglect of A- and C-text manuscripts has begun to be rectified, but with one or two exceptions the most thoroughly studied copies of Langland's final version remain those highlighted by Russell's important early essays: San Marino, Huntington Library, HM 143 (sigil X), the copy text of all modern editions and a repository of contemporary response in the form of marginalia and extensive, sometimes wayward, «corrections»; the Hiberno-English copy in Oxford, Bodleian Library, Douce 104 (D) with its unique cycle of marginal illustrations; the «Ilchester» manuscript (J), the work of another prolific London «celebrity scribe», with a scribally-confected polemical prologue; and London, British Library, Additional 35157 (U), originally a rather more modest cousin of X with minimal medieval annotation, whose surfaces were subsequently covered with sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century commentary on politics and the church².

² For a convenient listing of the manuscripts, see Ralph HANNA, *William Langland, Authors of the Middle Ages*, 3, Aldershot, 1993, p. 37-42. A helpful summary of the state of knowledge and of the results of his own researches on mostly A and C copies can be found in Simon HOROBIN, «Manuscripts and readers of *Piers Plowman*», in *The Cambridge Companion to Piers Plowman*, ed. by Andrew COLE and Andrew GALLOWAY, Cambridge, 2014, p. 179-197. Representative studies of major C-text copies include: Carl GRINDLEY, «Reading *Piers Plowman* C-Text Annotations: Notes toward the Classification of Printed and Written Marginalia in Texts from the British Isles 1300-1641», in *The Medieval Professional Reader at Work: Evidence from Manuscripts of Chaucer, Langland, Kempe, and Gower*, ed. by Kathryn KERBY-FULTON and Maidie HILMO, Victoria, 2001, p. 73-141; Michael CALABRESE, «[*Piers*] the [*Plowman*]: The Corrections, Interventions, and Erasures in Huntington MS Hm 143 (X)», *The Yearbook of Langland Studies*, 19, 2005, p. 169-199; Stephen H. A. Shepherd, «Text-Image Articulation in MS Douce 104», in *Yee? Baw for Bokes: Essays on Medieval Manuscripts and Poetics In Honor of Hoyt N. Duggan*, ed. by Michael CALABRESE and Stephen H. A. SHEPHERD, Los Angeles, 2013, p. 165-201; and D. Vance SMITH, «The Shadow of the Book: *Piers Plowman*, The Ilchester Prologue, and Inhumane Revision», in *Yee? Baw*, ed. by M. CALABRESE and S. SHEPHERD, p. 203-218. The B-text copies possibly containing the work of Adam Pinkhurst or «Scribe B», in the first case as copyist, in the second as corrector, are Cambridge, Trinity College, B.15.17 (sigil W) and London, British Library, Additional 35287 (M). See Simon HOROBIN, «Adam Pinkhurst and the Copying of British Library, MS Additional 35287 of the B Version of *Piers*

But although the terse descriptions offered by the poem's various editors frequently offer little in the way of encouragement to the would-be investigator, those copies of Langland's work still languishing in relative obscurity will repay careful study, as I hope to illustrate here with a single example. Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, 293 (sigil S) does not feature in Russell's survey of responses to the C version, nor in Ian Doyle's overview of *Piers* manuscripts or any subsequent extended critical discussion that I know of³. The reasons for its neglect quickly become apparent: as I will show, the Corpus manuscript lacks both the carefully executed decoration and the extensive medieval marginal commentary that make some of the better-known copies such obviously attractive resources for students of Langland's earliest readership. Since the manuscript is also missing significant portions of the text, it is not surprising that this copy has not been much discussed. Yet precisely the unique textual lacunae in its rendition of *Piers* make the Corpus manuscript (hereafter S) an intriguing, if eccentric, witness to the forms that Langland's poem might take in the years immediately following its composition⁴. Where it has figured in the literature on *Piers Plowman* at all, S has been noted as a peculiarly defective copy, one of limited usefulness to the modern Langland editor. Neither students of reception nor textual critics have apparently considered the alternative possibility: that the unique disposition of the poem in the Corpus

Plowman», *The Yearbook of Langland Studies*, 23, 2009, p. 61-83; and Simon HOROBIN and Linne R. MOONEY, «A *Piers Plowman* Manuscript by the Hengwrt/Ellesmere Scribe and its Implications for London Standard English», *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, 26, 2004, p. 65-112.

³ A. I. DOYLE, «Remarks on Surviving Manuscripts of *Piers Plowman*», in *Medieval English Religious and Ethical Literature: Essays in Honour of G. H. Russell*, ed. by Gregory KRATZMANN and James SIMPSON, Cambridge, 1986, p. 35-48. The Corpus manuscript can be viewed online at *Parker Library on the Web*: <https://parker.stanford.edu/parker/catalog/zf010vc1580> (retrieved 7th March 2018). I am grateful to the Library and to the sub-librarians, Dr Alexander Devine and Dr Anne McLaughlin, for so warmly accommodating my visit to consult the manuscript, and to the University of Warwick for a term of study leave during which the original research for this essay was carried out.

⁴ Ralph Hanna puts S in the second quarter of the fifteenth century; see R. HANNA, *William Langland* (*supra* n. 2), p. 42. The editors of the Athlone Press edition of the C version place it slightly earlier, in the first quarter. See the description of the manuscript in *Piers Plowman: The C Version*, ed. by George RUSSELL and George KANE, London, 1997, p. 12-13. All subsequent references to *Piers Plowman* C are to this edition unless otherwise stated. References to the A and B versions are to *Piers Plowman: The A Version*, ed. by George KANE, London, 1960 and *Piers Plowman: The B Version*, ed. by George KANE and E. Talbot DONALDSON, London, 1975.

manuscript reflects, at least in part, deliberate medieval editorial activity. That possibility makes S worthy of careful reassessment here for what it might tell us about early readers' priorities and perceptions about *Piers Plowman*.

Before I consider in detail the evidence that S transmits a medieval «edition» or redaction of *Piers Plowman*, a preliminary examination of the manuscript and its text will indicate both those features that have kept S in relative obscurity, and the nature of its evidence for the poem's reception. Nothing definitive is known of the manuscript's early ownership, but we may infer from its humble appearance a different class of reader for this copy than for the elegant productions by well-known London scribes that have received the greater share of scholarly attention. Even among the notoriously minimalist *Piers* manuscripts, the Corpus manuscript looks like an ugly sister next to a smart copy of C like X, or the even more handsome B-version copy Cambridge, Trinity College, B.15.17 (sigil W, the closest Langland scholars get to their Ellesmere, and perhaps even copied by its scribe). The vellum used in the Corpus manuscript is not of the finest quality, and the leaves are irregularly sized, with the first quire having been particularly heavily cropped, also at an angle⁵. Although George Russell and George Kane report no loss of text as a result of this cropping, in places longer Latin quotations, or those copied at the ends of lines rather than set separately below have been re-touched, with the ends of words re-supplied above the line where they have been partially cut away⁶. The pages of S, moreover, were not ruled, so the text appears somewhat irregular, and that irregular appearance of the manuscript is exaggerated by a change of script size at the start of the sixth quire, on page 79.⁷ M. R. James believed that the scribe had changed at this point, though as Russell and Kane observe, the details of the hand, an anglicana script with some secretary influence, remain similar⁸. If the change represents simply a more compressed version of the original scribe's hand, it may reflect a further effort at economy, since by Russell and Kane's calculations the book

⁵ Russell and Kane report the average size of leaf, 165x250mm, but the first leaf of the volume measures from 140-150x246mm.

⁶ For example, -si restored interlinearly to the end of «moysi» in C.8.86α, which appears at the end of line 86 on p. 73.

⁷ Somewhat unusually, this copy is paginated, not foliated, in «reddish crayon»; see *The C Version*, ed. by G. RUSSELL and G. KANE (*supra* n. 4), p. 12.

⁸ See M. R. JAMES, *A Descriptive Catalogue of the Manuscripts in the Library of Corpus Christi College Cambridge*, 2 vols, Cambridge, 1912, II, p. 70; *The C Version*, ed. by G. RUSSELL and G. KANE (*supra* n. 4), p. 13, n. 88.

from here accommodates an average of 42 rather than 35 lines on each page; in any case, the change of scribe or format was done without consideration for the now untidy appearance of the opening at pages 78-79.

In keeping with these apparent economies, the decoration of the manuscript is minimal, and more closely resembles the plainer home-made copies of *Piers* than the finest professional productions. The poem as presented in S begins with an initial red letter ten lines high; initial letters of each line (and sometimes the whole initial words) are touched in red, and Latin is either in red, or traced in the text ink and then inked over in red. Where the latter method was deployed, the manuscript has a scruffy, amateurish appearance in comparison with those copies that consistently leave gaps for later rubrication, and that use various methods to mark up the spaces for subsequent filling⁹. Passus rubrics are marked in the same way, and each new passus begins with a red initial two lines high; these are plain letters, however, not the elegant blue lombards with red flourishing used in many of the more upmarket copies of *Piers* like W, and a long way from the gold initials picked out with daisy buds (a metropolitan fashion before 1400, as Doyle reports) in Ilchester¹⁰.

S lacks not only the higher grades of decorative detail found in some other copies, but also the extensive marginal commentary supplied (albeit in an informal script) by the annotator-corrector («Hand 2») of X, or even the more minimal system of marginal rubrics found in Huntington Library, HM 137 (P) and some of its other family members, a scheme that highlights the names of the seven deadly sins together with formally or rhetorically distinct passages such as prophecies and sermons¹¹. Only two of the seven sins receive marginal rubrics in S, Glutton and

⁹ Patricia Bart has described the system, in the ABC splice San Marino, Huntington Library, HM 114 (Ht), of marking small crosses where rubricated Latin was to be added at the ends of lines: see Patricia R. BART, «Intellect, Influence, and Evidence: The Elusive Allure of the Ht Scribe», in *Yee? Baw*, ed. by M. CALABRESE and S. SHEPHERD (*supra* n. 2), p. 219-243, at p. 234. In another, even more visually attractive copy, Cambridge, Newnham College, 4 (Y of B), which contains extensive rubrication not only of Latin but also of many English nouns, a small guide letter «k» appears on f. 12v in the right margin to flag for rubrication the word «kyng» at the end of the line B.3.188. Like Ht, this book appears to have been the work of a London professional; see A. I. DOYLE, «Remarks» (*supra* n. 3), p. 39-40 and Ralph HANNA, *London Literature, 1300-1380*, Cambridge, 2005, p. 243-247.

¹⁰ A. I. DOYLE, «Remarks» (*supra* n. 3), p. 45.

¹¹ Russell was the first to describe the system of marginal rubrication or glossing that appears to have developed «quite early» in the transmission of C, but «which seems

Sloth (p. 58 and 61), although that minimalist approach to annotation is potentially revealing in itself. As in one or two other copies of *Piers* where Glutton is virtually the only sin honoured with marginal rubrication or similar marking¹², Glutton steals the show, on the manuscript page as in the original poem. The scribe continues the work of the poet as sin and literary narrative together threaten to overwhelm the controlling structures of official penitential discourse.

Apart from these two notes, and a third marking C.Prol.153 as verse («versus», p. 5), the manuscript's material presentation offers little that is immediately legible as evidence for the poem's reception¹³, though a further possible clue appears in the form of a slip of vellum, wrapped around the first quire and carrying the words, «God spede the plowgh / and sende vs corne ynowh»¹⁴. As

not to be archetypal». See G. RUSSELL, «Early Responses» (*supra* n. 1), p. 276. As Marie-Claire Uhart subsequently suggested, pointing to the nearly identical rubrication in the C-text copies A and V, Russell perhaps over-stated the diversity of the C-text glosses. See Marie-Claire Uhart, «The Early Reception of *Piers Plowman*», unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Leicester, 1986, p. 87. A fuller account of the development and transmission of marginal glosses in C-text manuscripts that would take into account the textual relationships established in Russell and Kane's edition has yet to be offered, though I intend to make such a study elsewhere.

¹² Oxford, Bodleian Library, Ashmole 1468 (sigil A of the A text) contains a single «cc» mark for a paragraph at the start of Glutton's confession at A.5.146 (p. 328). In another A-text copy, Oxford, Bodleian Library, Rawlinson poetry 137 (R), the minimal decoration is largely confined to touching with red the initial letter of every fourth line. But on f. 20r a large red initial letter at A.5.146 marks the beginning of Glutton's adventure, and on f. 21r a similar red initial indicates the opening of Sloth's confession. As in S, no other sins are marked by rubrication of any kind in this copy. By contrast, the scribe of another A-text copy, London, Society of Antiquaries, 687 (M) began highlighting the first sins in the sequence with marginal rubrics, but quickly abandoned the effort after «Superbia» at A.5.53 (p. 501) and «Inuidia» at A.5.58 (p. 501). As Uhart notes, «The sins form the most consistently rubricated part of the text», with many manuscripts supplying a full set of seven marginal glosses. See Uhart, «Early Reception» (*supra* n. 11), p. 76.

¹³ There are some illegible and indecipherable later additions to the margins on p. 1, 69, and 116, and a faint «Munde the» on p. 22v next to C.3.154. James notes the presence of «some odd rough pencil drawings»: these appear on p. 79, 113, and 123 (Russell and Kane's «p. 29» is a typographical error). If James's phrase recalls something out of his ghost stories, the description is about right: the sketch on p. 79 is a devilish-looking face, with grinning teeth and beard. As Russell and Kane report, the drawings are «apparently unrelated to the text». See *The C Version*, ed. by G. RUSSELL and G. KANE (*supra* n. 4), p. 13.

¹⁴ See *The C Version*, ed. by G. RUSSELL and G. KANE (*supra* n. 4), p. 13 and n. 89, citing Rossell Hope ROBBINS and John L. CUTLER, *Supplement to the Index of Middle*

Marie-Claire Uhart notes in her survey of early responses to *Piers*, the same verses appear as part of the frontispiece illustration in the AC copy Cambridge, Trinity College, R.3.14 (sigil T, f. 1v). And a «politicised version» of the same, actually, Uhart reports, the last line of the tract *I playne Piers*, appears as a later addition in the A version manuscript London, Society of Antiquaries, 687 (M). At the end of the copy of *The Prick of Conscience* on p. 358 of that manuscript a late hand has added the note: «A leafe wanting where in conclusion of all, are these 3 verses. God save the king and speeden ye plough / And senden the Prelattes cares inough / inough inough, inough, inough». These various notes in the three copies, Uhart observes, «may suggest that early readers linked the poem with political works»¹⁵. But whether the original scribe or owner of S did the same, given that the verses appear on a separate slip, remains tantalizingly unclear.

In its material form, then, the Corpus manuscript is somewhat unprepossessing, yielding few clues about its medieval readership. But the principal reason for the neglect of this copy is perhaps also its most striking feature: its omission of large portions of *Piers Plowman*. These gaps, of course, render the manuscript of limited use to the textual critic, and commentary on S has therefore been confined largely to rueful remarks by editors on its textual defects. «Imperfect [...] But the text is good» was Walter Skeat's verdict¹⁶. Carl Schmidt's description elaborates slightly: «Imperfect (probably from defective exemplar)»¹⁷. The imperfections of S's text, similarly attributed, at least in part, to its exemplar, are set out in Russell and Kane's description of the manuscript and in their list of C-text copies «with major deficiencies»¹⁸. S transmits, in Russell and Kane's numbering, C.Prol.1-8.265, 10.96-15.79, 15.156-306α, 21.1-7, 21.322-22.386, thus containing four large gaps of varying size, none shared with any other C copy¹⁹. In addition to

English Verse, Lexington, 1965, no. 964.5; Uhart, «Early Reception» (*supra* n. 11), p. 9. When the editors of the Athlone edition examined the manuscript, the strip was pasted to the flyleaf, but it is now held in place only by the binding.

¹⁵ Uhart, «Early Reception» (*supra* n. 11), p. 9.

¹⁶ *The Vision of William Concerning Piers the Plowman: In Three Parallel Texts*, ed. by Walter W. SKEAT, 2 vols, London, 1886 (reprinted 1965), II, p. lxxii.

¹⁷ *Piers Plowman: A Parallel-Text Edition of the A, B, C and Z Versions*, ed. by A. V. C. SCHMIDT, 2nd edn, 2 vols in 3 parts, Kalamazoo, 2011, II, part 1, p.7.

¹⁸ *The C Version*, ed. by G. RUSSELL and G. KANE (*supra* n. 4), p. 12-13, p. 47.

¹⁹ Two genetically-related copies of C, London, University of London Library, S.L. V.17 (A, olim St) and Dublin, Trinity College, 212 (V), share a defective ending,

these major absences, S has lost further text (C.22.26-28 and 22.63-69) where the bottom of the leaf comprising pages 119-20 has been torn away. Although Skeat commended the text, where complete, Russell and Kane confer no such special praise on this copy of *Piers Plowman* C: S is a member of the P family, after Huntington Library, HM 137 (P), Skeat's base text, rather than the X family, after Huntington Library, HM 143, recognized since the work of R. W. Chambers as the superior copy²⁰. The genetic twin of the Corpus manuscript, sigil F, contains «about 50» unique readings, according to Russell and Kane, that imply authoritative correction in that manuscript's immediate tradition, but S itself has «only a couple» such readings²¹. Its unknown provenance, its minimal decoration and annotation, and its textual deficiencies would seem, in short, to make the Corpus manuscript an unpromising candidate, either for the editor or for a study of *Piers Plowman*'s early readership.

There is, however, an alternative possible interpretation of the evidence reviewed so far. Previous descriptions of the Corpus manuscript's copy of *Piers* all seem tacitly to assume that the four major textual gaps (C.8.226-10.95, 15.80-155, 16.1-20.475, 21.8-321) reflect catastrophic but accidental damage or omission, either in the immediate copying and/or at an earlier stage in the manuscript's tradition. But as I indicated above, I want to entertain here a different possibility: that the Corpus manuscript does not simply present a badly mutilated *Piers* (though it is also that), but transmits an earlier scribe's redaction of the text, one that excises particular material and, in so doing, brings other aspects of Langland's work into greater prominence. While two of the textual gaps, that is, appear clearly the products of accidents, possibly by the immediate scribe of S, the signs of smoothing around the two later omissions, and their thematic similarity, might imply that S here transmits an intentionally reduced form of Langland's poem. In order to assess this possibility, I now examine each of the four omissions in S in turn.

breaking off at C.22.87. S's genetic twin, Cambridge, University Library, Ff.v.35 (F) also lacks two large passages of text, but these do not correspond with the gaps in S. See *The C Version*, ed. by G. RUSSELL and G. KANE (*supra* n. 4), p. 46-47.

²⁰ See *The C Version*, ed. by G. RUSSELL and G. KANE (*supra* n. 4), p. 176, though Russell and Kane find X only «the better of the two less-than-ideal options» for the basis of an edition, with c. 470 family errors compared with c. 520 in P.

²¹ *The C Version*, ed. by G. RUSSELL and G. KANE (*supra* n. 4), p. 102, n. 23.

The shortest lacuna in S's text is the easiest to explain as a common type of scribal accident, although it remains unclear whether that accident occurred in the present manuscript or in its exemplar. As Russell and Kane report, lines C.15.80-15.155 are dropped between pages 110 and 111, «the likely content of two sides, omitted by the scribe of S or wanting in his exemplar»²². The visual similarity between the beginnings of lines 79-80, «For alle be we **brethrene** ... / Ac **y** wiste neuere ... », and lines 155-156, «Without **e** bruttenynge of buyren ... / **Y** take wittenesse ...» might well have helped to induce the error.

Russell and Kane offer no direct comment on the larger omission of C.8.266-10.95, and it is therefore unclear whether they view this error as originating with the immediate scribe or with his exemplar. There is some evidence, however, that would suggest that the S scribe himself was responsible. The gap comprises, by my count, 542 lines in Russell and Kane's text, which with four additional lines for two passus rubrics and the enlarged initials that occur at passus boundaries, and at an average of 35 lines per page, would not quite cover 16 sides. This omission may therefore reflect a lost quire of eight leaves²³. It is noticeable that the loss of text occurs at the boundary of the fifth and sixth quires, that point in the manuscript where James detected a change of scribe and where the script dimensions and format, at least, changed, with 42 lines to a page on average thereafter. It is difficult to tell for certain if there is any physical loss from the book at this point, since the apparent remains of a quire signature on p. 79 are illegible. It is possible, of course, that the exemplar of S lacked a quire containing these missing lines. But given the coincidence of the loss of text and the quire boundary, one may easily imagine that the omission of C.8.266-10.95 occurred not in the exemplar but during an apparent hiatus or transition in the production of the Corpus manuscript itself.

The two later omissions of text, occurring at the end of passus 15 and beginning of passus 21 are more puzzling, and more difficult to account for by any straightforward kind of scribal error or material loss. On p. 114 of S, the last line of

²² *The C Version*, ed. by G. RUSSELL and G. KANE (*supra* n. 4), p. 12, n. 84.

²³ The usual composition of a quire in S, which contains seven quires of eight leaves (the fifth leaf of quire 3 a stub) plus an eighth quire of uncertain construction. James thought it a quire of ten lacking a leaf; I would concur with Russell and Kane in finding it an eight plus a singleton. See *The C Version*, ed. by G. RUSSELL and G. KANE (*supra* n. 4), p. 12, n. 85).

passus 15 is followed without physical disruption by the beginning of passus 21. As Russell and Kane report, the passus numbering is continuous, «evidently an earlier accommodation to the loss of XVI-XX»²⁴. That is, passus 15 is named on page 109 «sextus de dowel», and passus 21, according to the rubric on p. 114, is «septimus de dowel». Since the omission of passus 16-20 occurs in S without signs of physical disruption, it presumably originated not in that manuscript but in an exemplar that itself reflected two stages of activity (whether carried out by one hand or two): first the omission of five whole passus, and second, the subsequent smoothing of the passus numbering.

Of course, it is entirely possible that in an exemplar in which page and passus boundaries at passus 15/16 and passus 20/21 coincided, several passus could have been dropped as a result of a physical loss of quires similar to, but more catastrophic than, the lost quire containing C.8.266-10.95 that I hypothesized above. But several factors lead me to entertain the possibility, however strange it may seem, that the «lost» passus 16-20 were in fact deliberately suppressed by a scribe-redactor earlier in the transmission of S.

The first relevant consideration is the surprising continuity of the mutilated text, even without the continuous passus numbering that helps conceal all remaining traces of the gap in S (except, of course, to those already familiar with the contents of the poem in its complete form). For the two originally widely separated portions of text closing passus 15 and opening passus 21 are linked by shared references to dreaming and waking. At the end of passus 15, Patience describes the comfortable and spiritually slothful lives of the wealthy as like a cozy nap in summertime; yet as the Bible warns, these indolent rich will eventually wake, at the moment of death, to the status of spiritual beggars in purgatory, or worse, in hell. As if responding to Patience's penitential call to rouse oneself from self-indulgent spiritual torpor, S's text, continuing at C.21.1, has the dreamer wake up and write down what he has dreamed. The relevant passage in S, with the Russell-Kane line numbers added for clarity, reads as follows:

Whanne deþ awakeþ hem of hure wele þat were here so riche (C.15.304)
 Penne beþ þey pure pore þynges in purgatorie or in helle
 Daid in þe sauter of swich makeþ mynde
Dormierunt & nichil inuenerunt &c & alibi velud sompnium surgentium &c
 (C.15.306α)

²⁴ *The C Version*, ed. by G. RUSSELL and G. KANE (*supra* n. 4), p. 12, n. 84.

Explicit passus sextus Incipit passus septimus de dowel
 Thus y awakede & wrot what y had dremyd (C.21.1)
 And dyȝte me derly & dude me to chirche
 To here holy þe masse & be houslyd after
 In myddes of þe masse þo men ȝede to offrynge
 I felle eftsones aslept & sodenly mette
 Þat perus þe plowman was payntyd al rede bloody
 And cam in with a croys byfore þe comune peple (C.21.7)
 Þat crist vpon caluarye for mankynde on peynede (C.21.322)
 And of his baptisme in blod þat he blede on rode
 He hadde a maner mortar & mercy it hyȝte
 And with grace bygan to make a goud fundement (C.21.325)

(Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, 293, p. 114-115)

The irony of these lines from early in passus 21 as they appear in the Corpus manuscript is that even as the dreamer writes down his dream, the entire contents of the vision that he documents in the authorial text, beginning in omitted passus 20 and culminating in the crucifixion and harrowing of hell, has, knowingly or otherwise, been written out of the poem! Scribal eyeskip from references to dreams and waking in one passus to another is probably an insufficient explanation of the loss of passus 16-20, especially since passus 20 also contains a moment of waking and return to sleep at a passus boundary (C.19.335-20.1-5). But it seems possible that someone wishing, however improbably, for a reduced version of *Piers* saw in the references to dreaming and waking at the end of passus 15 and beginning of passus 21 a means of concealing their mutilation of the text, an act of concealment completed in the renumbering of passus headings that Russell and Kane observed.

The suspicion that something more peculiar than a common type of scribal accident occurred in an ancestor of S's text is compounded by a second factor that will have become apparent from the passage I quoted above from pages 114-15 of the Corpus manuscript. For if we assume the loss of passus 16-20 to have been accidental, we must then explain the coincidence of another calamity that befell S's ancestor only seven lines further into the poem. Here, as is evident in the quotation above, the S text drops C.21.8-321, lines that were again, Russell and Kane note, since there is no physical disruption around the gap, «presumably not in the exemplar»²⁵.

²⁵ *The C Version*, ed. by G. RUSSELL and G. KANE (*supra* n. 4), p. 12, n. 84.

Of course, although they now have the appearance of near-simultaneity, these two accidents need not necessarily have occurred at the same time in the same copy, or in the order in which they now appear in the text. It is possible to imagine a scenario, for example, in which the loss of C.21.8-321 perhaps occurred first, with the leaves containing the missing whole passus 16-20 lost later, in the same copy or a descendant, with subsequent smoothing of the passus numbering to accommodate the loss. More lost leaves, perhaps the two inner bifolia of a quire, could account for the missing text in passus 21. Alternatively, the accident might have been scribal eyeskip from one mention of the cross to another in C.21.7 («cam in with a cros bifore þe comune peple») and in C.21.321 («And grace gaf hym þe cros with the garlond of thornes»). In that case the scribe was an unlucky fellow indeed when his eye lighted on the cross in line 321 and not on one of the half-dozen intervening instances in C.21.14, 41, 50, 63, 142, and 199, for the word runs through Conscience's sermon, in various alliterative collocations, like a musical theme.

But a third and final curiosity about the two later omissions of text in S might give us pause before we explain them away as the results of a series of unfortunate but commonplace accidents. For the two omissions, if accidental, coincidentally dispose of two substantial passages, of varying size, of material on the same theme. Passus 18-20 (if admittedly not 16-17, also omitted) and 21.8-321 both contain Langland's account of biblical/salvation history, culminating in the life and passion of Christ, first as observed directly by the dreamer, and second as recapitulated in Conscience's *vita Christi* homily in passus 21. One might pause to wonder what kind of reader, if we witness here a deliberate suppression rather than inadvertent omission of materials, could possibly have wanted a *Piers Plowman* without its two major sections of biblical narrative. He or she would have been an unusual reader, certainly. Modern scholars are unanimous in feeling that passus 20 of C (18 of B) represents the climax of the poem before the catastrophe of the two final passus. On the evidence of the manuscripts, many medieval readers must have shared this view, including the hand responsible for the running titles in manuscript M of the B version. This hand marks out B passus 18 on the passion as a highlight, almost as a separate volume within the book²⁶. While at least one modern critic of *Piers*

²⁶ The running titles in this manuscript are usually confined to passus or sometimes «book» («liber») numbers. But on f. 87r and f. 91r the heading instead reads

describes «bible» as its major genre,²⁷ many of the other manuscripts highlight in various ways the affinities of Langland's work to biblical and apocryphal narrative. In the Vernon manuscript, for example, the A version of *Piers* appears in part 4 with narratives of the *Life of Adam and Eve*, *Joseph of Arimathea*, and *Judas and Pilate*²⁸. In another A version copy, London, British Library, Harley 3954 (H³), the text is gathered with, among other items, an *Infancia saluatoris* in English verse.²⁹ In the C version copy Oxford, Bodleian Library, Laud misc. 656 (E), Langland's poem appears collected with *The Siege of Jerusalem*, a sermon on the creed using biblical examples, a tract on the ten commandments also illustrated with biblical exempla, and a collection of biblical sententiae. In other manuscripts, marginal rubrics, rather than collocations with other works, imply the affinities between *Piers* and biblical or pseudo-biblical narrative in the eyes of many of its medieval readers. A rubric in the Ilchester manuscript (J of C) next to C.14.88a highlights the other end of the life of Christ, «De natiuitate domini» (f. 73r). That *Piers* could be viewed as a collection of biblical narratives and exempla, as the combination of texts in E of C implies, is further suggested by the marginal rubric «Of Sodom & gomor» found at B.14.76 in Oxford, Oriel College, 79 (O) and its genetic partner Cambridge, University Library, LI.iv.14 (C²).³⁰ A hypothetical redactor in the S textual transmission who wilfully excised those passages of the poem most closely affiliated with biblical narrative

«passus xviius de passione». One of the several marginal annotators in the volume, called Hand 5 in the PPEA edition, similarly wrote «de passione Cristi» next to B.18.1 on f. 86r. See *The Piers Plowman Electronic Archive, Vol. 5: London, British Library, MS Additional 35287 (M)*, SEENET series A.7, ed. by Eric ELIASON, Hoyt N. DUGGAN, and Thorlac TURVILLE-PETRE, web edition, 2014:

<http://piers.chass.ncsu.edu/texts/M>, and the Introduction to that volume, section I.9.

²⁷ Steven JUSTICE, «The Genres of *Piers Plowman*», *Viator*, 19, 1988, p. 291-306.

Anne Middleton notes the resemblance of *Piers* to «alliterative Biblical paraphrase and didactic verse» while also pointing out the absence of any statement of generic affiliation within the work itself. See «Piers Plowman», in *A Manual of the Writings in Middle English 1050-1500*, ed. by Albert HARTUNG et al, vol. 7, Hamden, 1986, p. 2211-2234, 2419-2448, at p. 2228.

²⁸ See *The Vernon Manuscript: A Facsimile of Bodleian Library, MS Eng. poet. a.1*, with intro by A. I. DOYLE, Cambridge, 1987.

²⁹ See Carleton BROWN and Rossell Hope ROBBINS, *The Index of Middle English Verse*, New York, 1943, no. 250.

³⁰ See the image and transcription of f. 57v of the Oriel manuscript in the PPEA edition: *The Piers Plowman Electronic Archive, Vol. 3: Oxford, Oriel College, MS 79 (O)*, ed. by Katherine HEINRICHS, SEENET series A.5, web edition, 2014: <http://piers.chass.ncsu.edu/texts/O> (retrieved 16th November 2017).

would be an unusual outlier in the apparently widespread reception of the poem as a form of biblical narrative.

But some possible motivations for the deliberate suppression of the missing materials, if such it was, might suggest themselves. A brutally reduced *Piers* without its *vita Christi* might have been spliced together by a reader who felt he had better versions of such biblical materials elsewhere in a manuscript compilation. C is the version of Langland's work most likely, in fact, to occur in single-item manuscript volumes, but there are copies of C combined with other texts, including E containing the *Siege* and the various collections of biblical exempla and sayings mentioned earlier. Two brief excerpts of the C version occur in the collection made by John Cok, Cambridge, Gonville and Caius College, 669/646, which also contains a pseudo-Bonaventuran life of Christ³¹. Might another reader earlier in S's transmission have decided to cut down his *Piers* for combination with a similar work that he believed to offer a more authoritative version of the life of the Saviour?

Alternatively, a compressed *Piers* might reflect rather different perceptions about Langland's work. Without its climactic biblical narrative, the poem remains more terrestrially bound as the dreamer's penitential quest, via Patience, for Piers. The omission of C.21.8-321, at least, might be explained fairly readily as a deliberate editorial act designed to bring the ploughman into greater prominence, and here a hypothetical S-redactor would be in the company of more of his fellow medieval text producers. Many copies suggest an enthusiasm for the plowman hero. As Uhart notes, Piers's first appearance, testament, and pardon are highlighted by marginal rubrics in a number of manuscripts³². The genetic pair of C-text copies A and V, for example, share the same marginal gloss at C.7.181-182, «Hic primo comparet petrus plouhman». Other manuscripts mark the first entrance of the ploughman in less obtrusive ways: Oxford, Bodleian Library, Rawlinson poet. 137 (R of A) provides a red painted initial letter on f. 22r at A.6.25, announcing Piers's first arrival into the poem; the scribe of Oxford, University College 45 (U of A) places a nota in the text ink, underlined in red, next to the same line (f. 21r). As Uhart notes, rubrication of

³¹ See Simon HOROBIN, «John Cok and his Copy of Piers Plowman», *The Yearbook of Langland Studies*, 27, 2013, p. 45-59.

³² Uhart, «Early Reception» (*supra* n. 11), p. 88.

Piers and his activities is most often confined to the visio³³, but the marginal annotator of Oxford, Bodleian Library, Douce 104 (D of C) tracks the later events of passus 21 with a series of notes on the pardon granted to Piers, the four seeds given to him by Grace, and his plough and cart (f. 101v-104r)³⁴. And at least one scribal redactor of the poem, the person responsible for the ABC splice Ht, registered his enthusiasm for the ploughman in a more dramatic way, interpolating into the ploughing of the half-acre two large blocks of textually peculiar C-text material shared with the Ilchester manuscript, but here uniquely converted into a long additional speech for Piers.³⁵ It seems possible that a hypothetical S-redactor thought to suppress the block of material in passus 21 that intervenes between Piers's dramatic bloodied entrance at C.21.5-6 and his reappearance at C.21.183 (where in the guise of his namesake Peter he is granted pardon by Christ) in order to keep the ploughman on stage and to sideline that sometimes tedious grammar master Conscience³⁶.

Whether by design or not, the omission in S of the line that mystifies the exact identity of the embattled knight who enters in Piers's armour but «riht lyke in alle lymes to oure lord iesu» (C.21.8) has the effect both of simplifying the poem and bringing Piers more clearly into the spotlight. Another scribal redactor, the hand responsible for the version of the poem in Oxford, Corpus Christi College, 201 (F of B), also intervened in the text to simplify the allegory here, although in a different direction. Andrew Galloway observes that in F's version, «Piers armes» (B.19.12) become «cristis armes». Where Langland cultivates mystery around the figure of Piers curiously mingled with Christ, the F redactor cuts through the ambiguity: as

³³ Uhart, «Early Reception» (*supra* n. 11), p. 89.

³⁴ See the transcription of the marginalia in Kathryn KERBY-FULTON and Denise L. DESPRES, *Iconography and the Professional Reader: The Politics of Book Production in the Douce Piers Plowman*, Medieval Cultures 15, Minneapolis, 1999, Appendix 2, p. 181-191.

³⁵ See John THORNE, «Piers or Will: Confusion of Identity in the Early Reception of *Piers Plowman*», *Medium Aevum*, 60, 1991, p. 273-284; Sarah WOOD, «Nonauthorial *Piers*: C-text Interpolations in the Second Vision of *Piers Plowman* in Huntington Library, MS Hm 114», *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 114, 2005, p. 482-503.

³⁶ The description of Piers in S contains an intriguing and no doubt unconscious reflection of the suppressed materials that followed in the original text: the unique reading «al **rede** bloody» for Russell-Kane's «al bloody» at C.21.6 echoes Will's question in line 11, absent from S: «who paynted hym so rede?»

Galloway observes, in F's version the figure is «simply Jesus»³⁷. In S, the bloodied figure is simply Piers, and a clear instance of scribal editing to accommodate the loss of C.21.8-321 similarly enhances through clarification Piers's role at the expense of another figure, in this case Grace. In Russell and Kane's edited text, Grace gives Piers the cross upon which Jesus died for man's sins. With a mortar made either by Piers or by Grace (the subject of C.21.324 is not entirely clear) from Christ's sacrificial blood, Grace builds the foundations of the house Unity Holy Church:

And grace gaf hym þe cros with the garlond of thornes

That Crist vpon Caluary for mankynde on peyned.

And of his bapteme and bloed þat he bledde on rode

He made a manere mortar and mercy it hihte.

And þerwith grace bigan to make a good foundement (C.21.321-325)

Though the agency at times is ambiguous, it seems simplest to imagine that in Langland's original text Grace performs all the sequence of actions described in these lines. With the omission of C.21.321 in S, however, «Grace» is dropped, and subsequent scribal smoothing clarifies the grammatical subject of line 324 in favour of Piers:

I felle eftsones aslept & sodenly mette (C.21.5)

þat perus þe plowman was payntyd al rede blody

And cam in with a croys byfore þe comune peple (C.21.7)

þat crist vpon caluarye for mankynde on peynede (C.21.322)

And of his baptisme in blod þat he blede on rode

He hadde a maner mortar & mercy it hyȝte

And **with** grace bygan to make a goud fundement (C.21.325)

(Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, 293, p. 115)

The minor change from «perwith» to «with», unique to S, economically accommodates the following text to the omission of the lines that contained the original grammatical subject. With «Grace» lost with C.21.321, Piers becomes the only possible subject of C.21.324, and in C.21.325, Grace is demoted to the status of

³⁷ Andrew GALLOWAY, «Reading *Piers Plowman* in the Fifteenth and the Twenty-First Centuries: Notes on Manuscripts F and W in the *Piers Plowman Electronic Archive*», *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 103 (2004), p. 232-252, at p. 240. For the F text, see *The Piers Plowman Electronic Archive, Vol. 1: Oxford, Corpus Christi College MS 201*, ed. by Robert ADAMS, Hoyt N. DUGGAN, Eric ELIASON, Ralph HANNA, John PRICE-WILKIN, and Thorlac TURVILLE-PETRE, web edition, 2014, <http://piers.iath.virginia.edu/exist/piers/main/B/F> (retrieved 16th November 2017).

Piers's workmate rather than the foreman of the construction site Unity. The accommodation of the text to the loss of C.21.8-321, whether or not it was done with any knowledge of the contents of the missing portion, thus further inscribes Piers as the hero of the sequence. And with the omission of its *vita Christi* and some of the enigmatic overlay of the figures of Jesus and Piers, *Piers Plowman* itself becomes more simply a poem about Piers. The vellum slip in S bearing the words «God spede the plowgh», whenever it was added, was perhaps prescient in flagging the emphasis placed in this particular volume upon the ploughman and his plough.

Readers will draw their own conclusions about whether or not they find convincing the speculations offered here about a possible scribal redactor behind the drastically reduced *Piers* in the Corpus manuscript. If he existed, he must have been a reader interested in Piers and the dreamer, but satisfied that he had enough «bible» to read elsewhere. But I hope in any case to have demonstrated something of the complex histories of transmission and reading that might be located in even the most initially unpromising and ordinary of the surviving copies of *Piers Plowman*. Much recent effort has been expended upon extending the list of known manuscript copies: researches by Lawrence Warner and Eric Weiskott, in particular, have focused on identifying hitherto overlooked sixteenth-century extracts of the poem³⁸. At the same time, many of the complete (or partially complete, or deliberately incomplete) medieval copies known to students of *Piers Plowman* since Skeat's edition remain under-examined, known as little more than sigils in critical editions even to devoted Langland scholars. Further study of some of these neglected examples promises to reveal, as I have indicated in outline here, not only commonalities of interest among Langland's earliest readers, but also potentially as many individual «readings» or versions of *Piers* as surviving copies. Some of these «versions» may well appear simply bizarre or misguided to modern eyes, determined as they perhaps were by contingencies of production and context now irrecoverable. But all are worthy of some consideration as part of the alternative literary history of *Piers Plowman* still largely unexcavated from its manuscript witnesses.

³⁸ For example, Lawrence WARNER, «An Overlooked *Piers Plowman* Excerpt and the Oral Circulation of Non-Reformist Prophecy, c. 1520–55», *The Yearbook of Langland Studies*, 21, 2007, p. 119–143; Eric WEISKOTT, «Prophetic *Piers Plowman*': New Sixteenth-Century Excerpts», *Review of English Studies*, 67, 2016, p. 21–41.